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ABSTRACT

This booklet reflects issues raised at a workshop on women's education and empowerment held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education. It focuses on promoting empowerment for women in educational contexts ranging from formal education systems to literacy and poverty alleviation programs. Section 1 discusses two perspectives on women's empowerment: one that advocates improving women's position and equity without radically altering the existing structure of gender relations and another that sees women's advancement as necessarily involving the transformation of an excessively male-dominated society. Section 2 focuses on how educational opportunity is not necessarily translated into personal, social, and economic gains for Caribbean women. Section 3 uses the women's program, Mahila Samakhya, implemented in the Banda district of India, as an example of empowering women through participatory adult learning. Section 4 deals with new radical discourses in adult literacy work dealing with the issues of violence and creating safe adult learning environments for women. Section 5 highlights the following challenges for adult learning: (1) giving a voice to women who have suffered violent experiences; (2) informal learning; (3) the learner's role in determining the curriculum; (4) breaking discrimination barriers; and (5) connecting formal and nonformal systems of women's adult education within the perspective of lifelong learning. (YLB)

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ED 435 007

A series of 29 booklets documenting workshops held at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education

4a Women's education

Women's education: the contending discourses and possibilities for change

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Theme 4: Promoting the empowerment of women

Booklets under this theme:

4a Women's education: the contending discourses and possibilities for change

4b Raising gender issues in formal and non-formal settings

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Foreword

In July 1997 the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education was held in Hamburg, organised by UNESCO and in particular the UNESCO Institute for Education, the agency's specialist centre on adult learning policy and research. Approximately 1500 delegates attended from all regions of the world, with representatives of 140 member states and some 400 NGOs. In addition to the work of the commissions and plenary which debated the official documents of the Conference The Hamburg Declaration and The Agenda for the Future, there were 33 workshops organised around the themes and sub-themes of the Conference.

As part of its CONFINTEA follow-up strategy, the UNESCO Institute for Education has produced this series of 29 booklets based on the presentations and discussions held during the Conference. The recordings of all the workshops were transcribed and synthesized over one year, edited, and then formatted and designed. A tremendous amount of work has gone into this process. Linda King, coordinator of the monitoring and information strategy for CONFINTEA, was responsible for overseeing the whole process. Madhu Singh, senior research specialist at UIE, undertook the mammoth task of writing almost all the booklets based on an analysis of the sessions. She was helped in the later stages by Gonzalo Retamal, Uta Papen and Linda King. Christopher McIntosh was technical editor, Matthew Partridge designed the layout and Janna Lowrey was both transcriber and translator.

The booklets are intended to draw out the central issues and concerns of each of the CONFINTEA workshops. They are the memory of an event that marked an important watershed in the field of adult learning. We hope that they will be of use both to those who were able to attend CONFINTEA V and those who were not. We look forward to your comments, feedback and continuing collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Education.

Paul Bélanger,
Director, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg
and Secretary General of CONFINTEA

Women's education:
the contending discourses and possibilities for change

Introduction

This booklet is a reflection on the issues raised at a workshop on women's education and empowerment, held during the 1997 Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V) in Hamburg. It focuses on promoting empowerment for women in a variety of educational contexts ranging from formal education systems to literacy and poverty alleviation programmes.

It is often assumed that schooling for women will automatically bring about their political advancement. However, there is evidence that schooling on its own does not enhance women's political voice. The radical agenda of education for empowerment, however, presents a contrast to the conventional conception of adult education and training. It encourages participants to work collectively, and develop strategies for use in areas of political and societal transformation.

The panel was chaired by Nelly Stromquist of the University of Southern California at Los Angeles. The other members represented a wide spectrum of expertise. Sara Hlupekile Longwe from FEMNET, the African Women's Development and Communication Network, opened the discussion on contending discourses in women's empowerment. Anne Marie Smith, Centre for Gender and Development Studies, University of the West Indies, Jamaica, talked about how educational opportunity is not necessarily translated into personal, social and eco-

nomic gains for Caribbean women. New radical discourses in adult literacy work dealing with the issues of violence were brought up by Jenny Horsman, literacy educator and researcher from Canada. Malini Ghose from NIRANTAR, a centre for women's education in India, described an example of empowering women through participatory adult learning.

CONFINTEA V demonstrated that feminist educators are increasingly influential in shaping international agendas on education, asserting the need for women not only to gain access to learning, but to participate fully in determining the content of the learning opportunities on offer.

Perspectives on women's empowerment

In recent debates on women's empowerment through adult learning different perspectives on women's advancement have been expressed. One perspective advocates improving women's position and equity without radically altering the existing structure of gender relations. This perspective includes the so-called self-reliant model of empowerment. In this context self-reliance means achieving the best one can for oneself within the present system. From this point of view, a women is "empowered" when she is literate, educated, and has productive skills, has access to capital and self-confidence. This view of empowerment as individual self-reliance is considered not to recognise nor question how a woman can gain increased access to resources if the hurdles of gender discrimination remain in place. It leaves out the political and ideological dimensions of women's struggle.

The other perspective sees women's advancement as necessarily involving the transformation of an excessively male-dominated society. This involves collective action and working as a team towards the goal of ending discriminatory practices and gender inequality. Advocates of this view use the term "gender equity" to denote their ambition for a new form of gender justice within an egalitarian society and are interested in structural transformation to create more justice. They hold the view that women can achieve an equal footing with men only if there is equality of opportunity, which is not the case, as women continue to face systematic discrimination. The unique educational situation of Caribbean women amply demonstrates that, even when women reach high levels of educational equality, they do not attain commensurate economic and political equality.

Are women empowered through education?

Women's marginalisation shows that participating in male dominated institutions, including education systems, benefits only a tiny percentage of women who are able to succeed with the odds stacked against them.

Trends in women's education in the Caribbean

Since the 1970s, the trend in the Caribbean has been for women to take greater advantage of education. As a result, women have been demonstrating higher levels of achievement compared to men. Educational trends show:

- Equal education opportunities for males and females in terms of access at the pre-primary, primary and secondary levels;
- Enrolment in favour of females at the primary level in Bahamas and at the secondary level in St. Lucia;
- Girls perform better in school on average;
- More females sit for the most sought after Caribbean Examinations Council Exam.

There are perhaps two main reasons for the unique educational situation of women in the Caribbean. First, Caribbean women are socialised to be independent and to prepare for shouldering family and other responsibilities, independent of male support. Secondly, education of women tends to result in lower returns than similar investments in the education of males: a woman needs to be more qualified in order to occupy the same job as a man.

However, this impressive educational achievement is not automatically translated into better jobs or into personal, social and political power for women, who remain at a disadvantage when compared to their male counterparts. Income disparities are considerable, and women have less access to political and economic power. For example, they are underrepresented in parliament, local government and the judiciary.

In other words, the positive development for women in the educational field over the past three to four decades have not been matched by greater empowerment. This situation is aggravated by economic globalisation processes: women in the adult education system are increasingly being threatened by younger graduates, equipped with new skills. A woman's family responsibilities very often prevent her from taking advantage of the opportunities for continuing education. They also have less time to dedicate themselves to adult continuing learning.

A persistent problem in education is the segregation of the curriculum according to fairly strict and traditionally accepted gender boundaries:

- Women are still concentrated in the so-called "soft subjects", qualifying them for low paying and low status jobs.
- Women with so-called "soft skills" such as sewing and hospitality management form the bulk of the unemployed labour force.
- Within the academic track, men predominate in physics, while women prefer biology, integrated science, the humanities or the arts.
- In the vocational training institutes women are usually clustered in non-technical areas.

One of the tasks of adult education is to address the limitations and contradictions of formal education and to foster a critical re-examination of the social, political and economic system, as it affects the situation of women. This is being done through an array of innovative strategies in adult learning which go beyond the conventional definitions of empowerment.

Community participation in adult learning

Women's adult learning can play an important role in making women aware of the many forms of disadvantage they suffer, pointing out their rights and helping them to shape their own lives. Often this kind of education is combined with the teaching of literacy, practical skills and community participation.

Community participation is now an accepted intervention in development. It means involving the beneficiaries in the planning and implementation of programmes. In the case of programmes for women, this entails women increasing their level of control over the allocation of resources and combating discriminatory practices which stand in their way.

Empowering women through participatory adult learning:
Mahila Samakhya

An example of empowering women through participatory adult learning is the women's programme Mahila Samakhya which is currently being implemented in the Banda district of India. The project has to be understood in the context of the hardships suffered by rural women in India. They are mostly caught up in the daily struggle for survival – fetching water, collecting firewood and securing a livelihood. Women are kept out of the decision-making process, denied access to information, and there is little or no recognition of their productive capacities. Power relations work against women at all levels – in the family, in the community and at the governmental level. Female illiteracy is very high and some villages do not even have a single literate women. Violence and poverty are inextricably intertwined.

Mahila Samakhya is run by women activists and mechanics who have been trained in specific skills. It aims to build upon and support the experience of non-governmental organisations in working with women in the field of education to initiate a process of change whereby poor rural women can move from a situation of passive acceptance of their situation to one of actively shaping their lives and environment. A key feature of such programmes is the combination of literacy teaching with training and practical skills such as water pump maintenance.

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The community participation approach first takes into account the women's experiences in their own communities and then gradually introduces them to basic education and literacy teaching. Thus instead of offering education and literacy as a panacea for their problems, it begins by:

- affirming women's existing knowledge and skills;
- initiating a process of critical questioning and analysing with regard to issues such as survival or discrimination within the family;
- promoting the new role of women as activists in their communities.

Adult learning is not just a matter of transferring skills but also of enabling women to use their skills to negotiate more effectively and to deal with structures of power. The training of women as handpump mechanics, for example, has led to building confidence and mobility and breaking stereotypes. It has enhanced competencies in:

- dealing with structures of power;
- lobbying government for change;
- demanding basic necessities from the power structures;
- demanding information.

Such projects illustrate how women's education and empowerment can be complementary processes. The demand for reading and writing skills as well as other basic educational skills follow social, cultural, political and economic demands.

Another innovative empowerment strategy involved encouraging groups of newly literate women to bring out a bi-monthly newsletter. The women were trained in the basic principles of print production, and they themselves decided the content of the material. They were given in-depth training in writing, language, editing and layout, so that they could be responsible for all stages of the production of the newsletter.

This had a number of empowering aspects other than just strengthening literacy skills. It helped to break gender stereotypes. It allowed women to control the content, thus giving women a voice in what they wanted to read and how they wanted to see themselves. The newsletter, published in the local language of the women, made possible a broader exposure of incidents of violence.

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The idea was to create a group that could train other groups of women in the community. It meant decentralising the innovation. It made learning and training not a one-time activity but a crucial process of improving capacities and developing new abilities, procedures and processes that could sustain learning.

Empowerment cannot take place without an empowering methodology. The creation of knowledge and information through material production takes into account women's experiential knowledge in various fields, such as health, water, forests and agriculture. Some aspects of empowering methodology are as follows:

- using women's own knowledge as critical to social development;
- locating literacy in social practices and lived realities of women;
- involving women in determining their needs, their issues, what they want to learn, and how they want to develop their own strategies at various levels;
- enabling women to transform, negotiate and challenge the structures of power, both at an individual and a community level;
- creating structures and institutions for sustaining the adult educational process;
- establishing partnerships with collaborating agencies and local government departments as crucial to women's role in the planning and conceptualising of projects, as well as in the actual implementation of them;
- making women responsible for managing and providing services such as hand-pump repair;

The literacy camp method is another strategy for coping with women's chronic problem of low and irregular attendance at non-formal educational centres. The literacy camp method organises residential training courses in which a conducive and supportive learning environment is encouraged through group learning, ensuring a high teacher-student ratio, encouraging women to generate their own texts as well as promoting a continuous learning environment including games and songs with an educational purpose.

Creating safe adult learning environments for women

Closely connected to the issue of creating conducive and supportive learning environments is the need to understand the difficulties and constraints experienced by women learners who come to literacy classes. It is necessary to ask why they often lack concentration, drop out, attend infrequently and have low motivation.

Research has shown that many adult learners are victims of violence. They are afraid to speak about their experiences, feel unsafe in classroom environments and struggle beyond their capacities and energies while attending classes. Literacy workers are seldom aware of the fact that many of the learners may be in a state of crisis and conflict – even trauma. In such a state of mind it is difficult for them to summon up the necessary motivation and concentration to benefit from a class.

It is crucial therefore to design adult literacy programmes that take into account the situation of women who have experienced trauma and violence. There is also a need to become aware of the varieties of knowledge that come from these experiences and to examine thoughtfully how such knowledge can be included in adult learning

Asking the following questions may help adult educators to understand the situation of learners who have been through violent situations:

- How attentive are the adult learners?
- What are the barriers to their attentiveness and concentration?
- What is the atmosphere needed in the classroom to help adult learners to feel safe?
- What changes need to be made in the classroom to create such an atmosphere?

Paying attention to these points can encourage learners to attend literacy classes and stay present, motivated and attentive.

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The challenges for adult learning

In the light of the above issues, the workshop concluded with the following challenges that adult learning will have to face if it is to empower women.

For many women violence is so embedded in their everyday lives and the culture surrounding them that they have difficulty in discussing the problem openly. Education for adult women should include an examination of the patterns of subordination to which they have been conditioned through cultural socialisation reinforced by schooling.

Adult learning should give a voice to women who have suffered violent experiences whether of a private or political nature. It should understand what a woman may be going through internally when she attends a literacy class and makes the effort to learn. In short, it should recognise that many and perhaps most women learners are survivors of violence, and take this into account in every aspect of a programme.

In designing curricula, it is necessary to focus on the learning methodology and learning environment. Is the learning environment a safe space for women? The learning environment also has to take into account informal learning situations, as a lot of important communication happens outside the classroom and does not form part of formal teaching. A genuinely participatory form of adult learning supports and promotes the learner's role in determining the curriculum.

Empowerment can give women a new perspective enabling them to reject things that they once accepted as part of their culture. This often results in conflicts within the family or the community, which have to be anticipated and addressed through adult learning.

Since discrimination against women is institutional in nature, breaking those barriers will also need some kind of public institutional legislation and governmental support such as affirmative action.

Although formal education has several limitations, it has nevertheless an empowering element. It is through formal education that people enter the professional or political elite, albeit in small numbers. On the other hand non-formal education is in a better position to challenge the status quo. The challenge for women's adult education is to connect the formal and non-formal systems within the perspective of lifelong learning. Adult education should deal with gender issues in the context of a whole package that goes from infancy to adulthood.

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It was mentioned earlier that there are different perspectives regarding women's empowerment. It is necessary to build bridges between those who choose the "self-reliant" way and those who take the path of more radical transformation. Only by encouraging a dialogue will it be possible to bring about a genuine transformation.

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The CONFINTEA logo, designed by Michael Smitheram of Australia, represents the lines on the palm of a hand. These lines are universal and yet different for each subject. They celebrate cultural diversity and the joy of learning.

Theme 4

Promoting the empowerment of women

Booklets under this theme:

a Women's education: the contending discourses and possibilities for change

b Raising gender issues in formal and non-formal settings